

Truancy Prevention

Truancy is a major problem affecting youth, families, schools, and the community. Youth who are truant are at greater risk of falling behind in their school work, dropping out of school, and being drawn into behavior involving criminal activity, drugs, alcohol, and violence. Parents of youth who are truant may face court sanctions for failing to send their children to school. Schools face the loss of state and federal funding when students drop out. Communities suffer when businesses have higher costs associated with training youth who have dropped out of school. Communities also suffer when youth are lost to delinquency or to welfare dependence due to their inability to obtain a job.

Because truancy is often the first sign that a youth is experiencing problems, early intervention with the youth and the youth's family is critical to addressing the behavior. This fact sheet highlights the elements of effective truancy prevention programs, strategies for preventing and reducing truancy with the child, the family and at school, and examples of successful truancy prevention programs.

Elements of Truancy Prevention Programs

- Early intervention with child
- Involvement of family
- Ongoing case management
- Specific focus on improving the child's developmental skills and self-esteem

- Collaboration by multiple community agencies (e.g., schools, social services, mental health, legal system, Boys & Girls Clubs or other youth organizations, etc.)
- Monitoring after completion of the program

Preventing and Reducing Truancy Occurs at Multiple Levels

Because truancy is viewed as a problem not only for the individual child, but for the child's family, the school, and ultimately the entire community, interventions often occur at multiple levels.

- ***With the Child***

Depending on the nature of the problem, services often include counseling to strengthen self-esteem and other developmental skills (e.g, problem-solving, decision-making and self-management skills), tutoring or other support with strengthening academic skills (e.g., peer tutoring, homework clubs, reading specialist, writing enhancement programs, etc.), support in negotiating problems with teachers, other school personnel and parents, specific services to address identified problems (e.g., substance abuse). Some communities have also used service opportunities as a way of engaging the youth in a project of interest.

- ***At the School Level***

Strategies range from improving tracking within

schools to identify and refer youth experiencing problems early. In some cases, a team approach (e.g., teachers, school counselors, social service workers, mental health, other community representatives, law enforcement, and parents) to do planning for individual students and to develop services (e.g., buddy systems, mentoring, tutoring, homework clubs, etc.) for at-risk students as a whole.

- ***With the Child's Family***

Depending on the nature of the problem, the focus is on improving parental management and coping skills, strengthening parents' commitment to education, and providing counseling (e.g., mental health, substance abuse, etc.). Parents may also be engaged in developing the attendance plan.

What Works in Truancy Prevention

Well Community Council

The goal of the program is to help families and youth change their attitudes and behavior with respect to school attendance. A program involves a partnership between the schools, business and religious leaders, social service workers, and the judges. The involved agencies provide intensive services, ranging from educational remediation and enrichment for students to long-term family counseling. The council has identified and articulated a different role for each agency in working with families. This includes the ways in which the agencies are expected to communicate with each other, and the sequence of interventions to be used, escalating in severity from initial meetings with parents to court hearings.

The Stay in School Program

This program uses a youth court approach to working with truant youth. The program targets middle school students who have just begun to have problems. Targeted students go to truancy court, where a panel of high school students question them and try to identify solutions. After court, youth and attorney mentors are assigned to each student for support. The student and the court sign a written agreement, and after two months, students return to the court to review their contract and report on their progress.

The strength of this program is thought to be the use of peers in helping their counterparts, in addition to adults.

Project Helping Hand

Project Helping Hand receives referrals from the schools for youth in kindergarten through eighth grades who have a minimum of 5 days of unexcused absences. (Referrals from parents and social service agencies are also accepted.) A truancy worker meets with the youth and family to conduct an assessment and to provide short-term family counseling, usually up to eight sessions. After the truancy worker completes the assessment, the worker meets jointly with the family and school personnel to develop a plan to improve the child's attendance and address family needs. Referrals for additional social services (e.g., housing, food stamps, day care, medical, substance abuse, psychiatric, parent support, and single-parent programs) are made on an as-needed basis. If the family fails to keep appointments, home visits are made to encourage cooperation. If parents continue to resist participating or school attendance does not improve, a referral can be made to the family court.

A combination of intervention strategies and resources are used by the truancy worker, including signed cooperative agreements among parents, youth, and the school; telephone discussions with appropriate parties; and other school resources such as child study teams, tutoring, and parent-teacher conferences. The workers strive to use extended family members as a support system as often as possible. Once a truancy problem is corrected, the case is closed and placed on an aftercare/monitoring status with contact made at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals to ensure that truancy does not persist.

In keeping with the program focus on early intervention, most students who have been referred are in grades K-3.

At School, On Time, Ready to Work

At the first sign of truancy, families are referred to the program by the school. Once referred, they are contacted by the prosecutor and given the opportunity to enter the program. When the family agrees to become part of the 90-day program, they enter a three-pronged treatment approach:

(1) Intensive supervision of the child: A worker (usually from a social service agency) is assigned to the child during the entire 90-day period. The worker verifies the child's school attendance daily and meets several times a week with him or her during the first 30 days of the contract. The worker also serves as a liaison between the social service agency, the prosecutor, the school, and the family.

(2) Support and therapy services are provided: Students in the program meet regularly with a mental health counselor to share life experiences and to learn skills to build self-esteem and confidence in school.

(3) Support and education services to the parents of the child: Parents attend group meeting that focus on effective

parenting techniques and the importance of their child's education.

Following completion of the program, students are tracked and attendance continues to be monitored.

For more information on truancy, contact the National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention at 864-656-6285. The National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention seeks to stimulate the development of partnerships between local justice systems (e.g., law enforcement, courts, prosecutors) and residents, organizations, and institutions in rural communities and small towns to prevent and reduce crime and violence. The Center focuses on research, education, technical assistance, and information dissemination.

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